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Times of transition: working with a new government

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Times of Transition:

Working with a New Government

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State Services Commission/ANZSOG
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Presentation aims:



1. Drawing on research into changes of government in Australia and internationally, to offer an assessment of challenges, opportunities and risks for the public service as it seeks to develop effective working relationships with the Ardern government.
2. To identify opportunities and strategies for the public service to understand, respond to and support the new government's agenda, now and in the longer term.

Assessing transitions



- My 2010 book *Learning to be a Minister*, tracked the experience of Rudd ministers as they made the transition to government.
- My 2014 books on Prime Ministers' Chiefs of Staff drew lessons about transitions (and much else) from people who had held the job from 1975-2013.
- I'm increasingly interested in leaders' 'organisational capacity' (or often its lack); 'partisan learning' and political parties' ability and willingness to learn; and the extent to which they understand the importance and significance of transition planning.

Changes of government



- Are, or maybe were comparatively rare in Australia:
 - Seven changes of federal government since 1945
 - Similar trend at the sub-national level
 - But significant turnover since 2008
 - One-term governments. Significant volatility.
- In NZ more frequent than in Australia in post-war era:
 - » Short-lived PMs in between longer periods of stable governments - lots of in-government leadership transitions.
 - » In recent history:
 - National: Bolger-Shipley (1990-99); Key-English (2008-17).
 - Labour: Helen Clark (1990-2008)

Lengthy tenures

- Often meant the other party is in Opposition for a long time
 - This has implications for experience, skills, networks and relationships.
 - Not being in Opposition for a long time can pose its own difficulties (as we've seen in Canberra, VIC & QLD).
 - Public service can become 'collateral damage' in the quest to discredit political opponents and render them 'unelectable' in future.
- Public servants are keen to serve a new minister, once they know who it is.
 - Ideally they'll have used the caretaker period to develop incoming government briefs that address its priorities and election commitments.

Transitions...



- Offer unrivalled opportunities for change and to achieve policy goals, especially when a change of government is expected and the election result decisive.
 - Paradoxically, the ability to exploit these opportunities can be constrained by a lack of experience and the need to 'learn' on the job.
 - Also by delays in getting key personnel on board.
- Inexperience; exuberance; hubris; lack of coordination; lack of discipline; and difficulties adjusting to the obligations and scrutiny of government are common risks.
- The early decisions of a new government offer important insights into its priorities and style
 - » I'll offer some 'outsider' perspectives on this later and we can debate these in Q&A.

But transitions also...



- Pose genuine challenges for the public service:
 - Forming mutually respectful, trusting relationships with ministers and their staff.
 - Adapting to the priorities and style of the incoming government
 - Understanding its agenda – immediate and longer-term
 - Getting on its 'wavelength' – its philosophy and style.
 - Being professional and effective given the ambiguities and uncertainties of the early phase of a term
 - Including unexpected changes of personnel and leadership.
- It is common for new governments to express concerns about the capacities and performance of the public service.

- An immense amount of learning needs to occur in a short time.
 - » Individual learning, but also collective learning for the government as a whole.
 - » Issues of transferability of previous experience to the current context.
- A key challenge is adjusting to being the Minister and all that goes with it:
 - The workload, the expectations, the constraints and the scrutiny.
 - Working with and through departments rather than doing things themselves or with a small group of personal staff.
 - Experience suggests one of the most difficult issues seems to be getting personal affairs/pecuniary interests in order.

New ministers need:



- To get across the brief; learn the portfolio; decide how they are going to decide.
- To appoint a Chief of Staff on whom they can rely:
 - For frank, confidential advice and judgment on policy and politics
 - To 'push back' when necessary; to sometimes be the bearer of bad or unwelcome news.
 - To help manage relationships with Cabinet colleagues (notably the Leader's office), other portfolio ministers, the party room, the department, stakeholders etc.
 - To run a 'good', calm and professional ministerial office.
 - To build respectful professional relationships with their departments, particularly the CE/Secretary/DG and senior leaders.

Ministers and departments



- Agencies can build trust with the minister and their staff, by:
 - *Being professional* – discharging its obligations to provide expert, professional and impartial advice and support to the government of the day.
 - *Being appropriately responsive*. Offering advice on systems and processes to get the office up and running; dealing with backlogs of correspondence.
 - *Being proactive* – working with the ministerial office to clarify the Minister's priorities, preferences and working style.
 - *Seeking reauthorisation* of projects and activities, to ensure they align with the Minister's agenda.
 - Doing the 'little things' well
 - Understanding they are *but one part* of what ministers do and that their advice is contestable.

Managing transitions: political staff



- Are often a trusted source of advice and support:
 - Political, administrative, policy, personal and emotional
 - Have complementary skills and expertise to what is provided by departments.
- Often know the Minister's style
 - Create a working environment that supports the minister – personally and professionally.
 - Can support the development of constructive relationships by helping the department to understand and respond accordingly.
- The 'best' ministerial advisors are loyal, competent and professional.
 - Know the parameters and limits of their roles and never forget that they exercise delegated authority on behalf of their Minister.

From campaigning to governing...



- The rise of the 24 hour news media and the 'permanent campaign' have had profound impacts on the job of Minister:
 - The mix of skills required is different when you win government – sometimes tough decisions about personnel are required.
 - Balance of where time and attention must be directed is different:
 - Prerogatives and priorities.
 - Duty vs discretion

From campaigning to governing (2)...



- Governing rhythms and agenda control are very important, but the media and the demand to 'sell' the government are relentless.
 - How to balance the strategic with the reactive?
 - How to communicate, and ensure coherence across government as a whole?
 - How to prioritise and reprioritise when circumstances change?
 - An effective private office is critical, especially for the leader.

Our research found:



- That the political parties have different expectations about the role of the public service:
 - Coalition ministers wanted advice about how the government's policy agenda could effectively be implemented.
 - Whereas Labor ministers looked to the public service for strategic advice, ideas and options.
 - This mismatch of expectations led to complaints about 'policy capacity'
- That political elites are profoundly influenced by 'stories' they have heard/been told about the public service
 - We need to be attentive to governing narratives because what people believe and tell each other shapes expectations and behaviour.

All governments come to office with 'a story'



- More accurately, they arrive with many stories or 'story fragments':
 - About the problems and failures of their predecessors; their approach to governing, policy, managing the Parliament, stakeholders etc.
 - About why their party might have lost office previously.
 - Perhaps too about what 'successful' leaders and governments do.
 - About how to manage political risks, expend political capital, deal with the media and stakeholders.
- Leaders are story-tellers. They're also very often the subject of stories.
 - Prime Minister Ardern is a case in point.

Governing narratives



- Have many and varied sources.
- Increasing mobility and connectivity of staffers and campaign strategists (and of officials too) means stories are migrating across jurisdictions and tiers of government
- It is important for the public service to identify and seek to understand:
 - The narrative of 'effectiveness' and 'success', as told by the incoming government.
 - The networks and 'courts' that shape and influence agendas and decision-making, including intergovernmental and others?
 - Who the policy communities/networks/other influential actors are, including 'policy entrepreneurs' whose role and potential influence may or may not be immediately visible or obvious.

This can be difficult if:



- The election result is unexpected; the parties need to negotiate to form minority or coalition government.
- A new government is suspicious and distrustful of the public service.
- A lack of experience or transition planning makes it hard to discern its priorities and agenda.
- Highly centralised leadership often characteristic of Opposition becomes the modus operandi in government.
- Early mistakes, setbacks, crises or unexpected events consume the energy and attention of the leadership group; and there is no one who understands the need to regain the initiative and for the rest of the business of government to continue
 - Here's where the PM's Chief of Staff is crucial.

Some key take-outs



- Political awareness is essential – both for alignment and strategies of influence.
- Being aware of the individual minister's background and experience is a good basis for building relationships.
 - What can departments (or staff for that matter?) learn about the experience and interests of the leader and senior ministers, the portfolio Minister and their staff?
- Narratives of governance provide opportunities to interpret and influence
 - They also help to align public service activities to government priorities.
- The most useful thing you can be doing as a public service is to **listen** to:
 - What the PM/government is saying; but also
 - How she is saying it.

Other key take-outs

- Important that on both sides of the relationship there is recognition that in the first term especially, people will be learning and growing into their roles
 - It's a **people business** – attend to relationships.
 - Understand there will be some flexibility as 'the plan' and priorities crystallise.
- David Epstein has reflected on the 'learned helplessness' he encountered in the APS in 2007
 - Where are the fault-lines within the bureaucracy?
 - How can those be addressed/remedied professionally in preparation for a successful transition?
- What is the government's change appetite?
 - How can the public service be proactive about that?

An outsider's take:



- This change of government in NZ is significant and symbolic:
 - Generational change - echoes of 'Kevin '07', Obama, Trudeau, Macron etc as long-term governments and/or unpopular leaders are replaced.
 - A double-edged sword, because of the expectations and hopes projected on the new government – and particularly, the leader.
 - How to harness the goodwill, because the honeymoon's finite?
 - How long with National persist with its current leadership?
- Jacinda Ardern's personal style is the foundation of the government's narrative:
 - Open, accessible, contemporary, inclusive, ordinary.
 - Can the public service adapt accordingly?

An outsider's take (2):

- The government has provided lots of clues to its priorities, agenda and operating style:
 - The Coalition agreement
 - Action-oriented: 100 day plan; she's promised more.
 - Caucus retreat
 - PM's speech on 3 February is another important opportunity.
- Key risks that I see :
 - ***There are continuities:***
 - Focus on material deprivation, child poverty etc, but there are fundamental differences of philosophy, beliefs about causation.
 - Public servants must understand and account for that in their advice and briefing.
 - Resort to external inquiries, taskforces etc – so still determined to have contestable policy advice.
 - How will officials 'stay in the loop'?

An outsider's take (3):



Risks continued...

- National was a long-term government
 - Many officials have spent their entire careers working within its framework and norms – may not even be aware this is so.
 - Leaders need to be engaged in dialogue about the shift and what it implies.
 - Can be difficult to unpick policies and programs that people worked on and were committed to.
 - Career officials need to remember that's the bargain they entered into.
- PM wants to put her own stamp on government – e.g. decision not to retain Better Public Services targets.
 - How to avoid fulfilling Bill English's prophecy/critique that the public service will 'drift'?

What would I know, I'm Australian, but...



- The government's policies are more interventionist than the NZ public service has been working with under Key-English
 - Many of the commitments imply a greater focus on program design, implementation and delivery.
 - Does the service have the requisite skills and capabilities? If not, how will it access them?
- While things have started well, this is an unusual coalition arrangement
 - There are risks in misunderstanding or failing to appreciate the dynamics of the central networks of decision-making and how these might evolve or change over time.
 - A 'court politics' perspective (and bitter international experience) reminds us how contingent these arrangements can be.

JUST FINALLY...

Governing cycles



- All governments confront the same imperatives. They need to:
 - Make the transition from campaigning to government
 - Develop mechanisms to achieve coherence and to project competence from early in their term.
 - Bargain and exchange to achieve desired outcomes because of their various dependencies (in parliament, their party room, with stakeholders, the media, and the public).
 - Make decisions across the spectrum of their responsibilities – therefore they need advice and routines.
 - Prioritise, manage the agenda, manage their time and preserve political capital.

Governing cycles (2)

- All will confront crises and unexpected events.
- All will face re-election.
- If they want to achieve longevity, which is their common desire, they have to find ways of renewing and refreshing their agenda and personnel.



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